

At the Allen Brothers Farm today, Rep. Peter Welch outlined a plan to help Vermont farmers devastated by Tropical Storm Irene get back on their feet.

"Many Vermont farmers were knocked down by Tropical Storm Irene but they are characteristically fighting to get back on their feet," Welch said. "In recent years, our farming community has created new business opportunities through vibrant farmers markets and CSA programs that provide Vermonters with nutritious local food. These farmers need a helping hand to restore their operations and get back to business."

Joined by three Vermont farmers, Welch announced three bills he has introduced in the U.S. House. The first, The Helping Devastated Farmers Act of 2011 (H.R. 3005), provides additional funding to two important programs that assist farmers affected by natural disasters. The legislation would add \$151 million to the USDA's Emergency Conservation Program and \$187.5 million to the USDA's Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

The Emergency Conservation Program provides emergency funding and technical assistance for farmers to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters. The Emergency Watershed Protection Program helps farmers reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat and reduce damages caused by floods.

The second bill, H.R. 2905, would help farmers currently ineligible for disaster assistance become eligible. Some Vermont farmers affected by Tropical Storm Irene are ineligible for U.S. Department of Agriculture disaster assistance because they did not have crop insurance when the storm hit, a requirement under current law. H.R. 2905 would temporarily waive this requirement, allowing farmers access to USDA assistance. Farmers taking advantage of the waiver would be required to purchase crop insurance for future disasters.

The third bill, The Fresh and Local School Foods Act (H.R. 3092), would allow Vermont to direct nearly \$90,000 to Vermont farms to purchase fruits and vegetables for Vermont schools, giving them much-needed boost after the damage caused by Tropical Storm Irene. Currently, Vermont receives about \$90,000 worth of fruits and vegetables from a regional distribution center in Rhode Island. Welch's bill would simply allow this money to be used to purchase local produce.

Welch is the founder of the House Hurricane Irene Coalition, a bipartisan group of over 50 lawmakers whose districts were affected by Irene. With Congress back in session next week, Welch plans to use this coalition to push for passage of these farmer assistance measures.